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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines a narrative method for the study of teaching which has as its principle feature the reconstruction of classroom meaning in terms of narrative unities in the lives of classroom participants. This purpose is achieved by comparatively outlining similarities and differences with closely associated lines of work. This study of narrative is primarily epistemological in character but deviates from epistemology as commonly understood in curriculum studies by focussing on personal experience rather than upon reconstructed formal logic. The governing question of the work is "How do teachers and students know their classrooms?" The working question is "What is the meaning of specific classroom actions for teachers and students?" Characteristics of the narrative method of inquiry are set forth by comparison and contrast with biography. Comparisons are restricted to five sets of recent educational writings : works by Pinar, Grumet, Darroch and Slivers, Berk, and Butt. The study begins with matters of similarity between biography and narrative and moves to matters of difference. Analysis indicates that reflection-in-action, biography, and narrative each contribute something to the understanding of classrooms. The case is made for narrative inquiry by sorting out its methods and purposes from those of biography. It is suggested that the narrative method offers a way to understand teaching and learning in classrooms as a temporal process reflecting the biographic histories of its participants. (JD)

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ON NARRATIVE METHOD, BIOGRAPHY AND NARRATIVE UNITIES IN THE STUDY OF TEACHING

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On Narrative Method, Biography and Narrative Unities in the Study of Teaching

Our purpose in this paper is to outline a narrative method for the study of teaching which has as its principal feature the reconstruction of classroom meaning in terms of narrative unities in the lives of classroom participants. We achieve this purpose comparatively by outlining similarities and differences with closely associated lines of work. Our study of narrative is primarily epistemological in character but deviates from epistemology as commonly understood in curriculum studies by focussing on personal experience rather than upon reconstructed formal logic. The governing question in our work is "How do teachers and students know their classrooms?" Our daily working question is "What is the meaning of specific classroom actions for teachers and students?"

Narrative inquiry is concerned with the personal histories of participants embedded within the social history of schools and schooling. A central construct within the narrative method is the notion of narrative unity (MacIntyre, 1981) defined in our work as a continuum within a person's experience which renders life experiences meaningful through the unity they achieve for the person. What we mean by unity is the union in a particular person in a particular place and time of all that the person has been and undergone in the past and in the past of the tradition which

helped to shape the person. The notion of narrative unity is not merely a description of a person's history but is a meaning-giving account, an interpretation, of one's history and as such provides a way of understanding the experiential knowledge of classroom participants. Our general method is to mutually understand and reconstruct the narrative unities within the narratives of participants. We can see within the history of an individual a number of narrative unities. The notion of narrative unity allows us the possibility of imagining the living out of a narrative as well as the revision of ongoing narrative unities and the creation of new ones. It is in this way that we frame our understanding of how classroom participants know, and come to know, their situation.

Narrative and Reflection-in-Action

Two recent papers (Connelly and Clandinin, 1985; Clandinin and Connelly, 1985) were devoted to outlining the purpose and method of narrative inquiry into classrooms. This was accomplished, in part, by comparing and contrasting our narrative inquiry with Schon's (1983) The Reflective Practitioner. Schon's principal purpose, similar to our own, is to outline an epistemology of practice in which the starting point for inquiry is a practical event rather than a working theory. Unlike the dominant epistemology of practice in the professions, which Schon names "technical rationality", his work assumes that practitioner thinking contains its own practical rationality. It is to the discovery and reconstruction of this rationality in the professions that his work aims.

Narrative method for the study of classrooms shares Schon's epistemological aims and methods for the professions. One consequence is

that the theoretical terms which result have a practical character which reflect the starting point in practice rather than in theory. The results of inquiry thereby take on the marks of "a language of the practical" (Schwab, 1970). Schon's key term, for instance, is "reflection-in-action". Some terms emerging from our narrative inquiry are "image", "personal philosophy", "narrative unity", "rhythm" and "ritual". These are terms whose justification and meaning reside primarily in the concrete, experiential detail of practice and only secondarily in one or another given theory. Thus, the emphasis in studies of the practical is shifted from an analysis of practice in terms of theory to the development of theory in terms of practice. In this turned-over relationship of fact to idea, specific teaching and learning events are the subject of interest and the thing to be explained. "Summaries", "averages" and "means" are not the ideational end. The specific event, and the theoretical repertoire required to account for it, is the intended end.

While the study of narrative shares these epistemological features with Schon's inquiry, narrative departs from reflection-in-action in its historical rendering of observed practice in terms of the narrative unities of the participants: students, teachers and researchers. By applying methods which might be called "grounded theory", Schon constructs a version of practical rationality in terms of observed actions. Narrative does this as well but it does so by accounting for teaching and learning actions in terms of participants' history; their narrative unities as these unities may be shown to bear upon observed classroom events.

Narrative and Biography

Due to its use of personal history, Butt (1984) labelled our work in narrative as a work in biography. In much the same way that the narrative method was earlier outlined by comparison and contrast with Schon's work, we propose to set forth further characteristics of the narrative method by comparison and contrast with biography. We shall restrict our comparisons to five sets of recent educational writings: works by Pinar, Grumet, Darroch and Silvers, Berk, and Butt. We begin with matters of similarity between biography and narrative and move to matters of difference.

Similarities: Pinar (Willis, 1978) draws upon Dewey's notion of a situation to emphasize that an educational event may be seen in terms of its history and its future consequences. He writes, "where one has been, and where one will be are both embedded in the present" (p. 334). For a person to adequately understand his/her present situation, according to this view, the person needs to bring forward prior, related, experience. Pinar develops a method, currere, which both names one's biographical history and also the method for its study. Berk (1980), also drawing upon Dewey, offers a similar definition of biography which he defines as "the formative history of an individual's life experience" (p. 90). Both autobiography and biography, then, concern themselves with the history of how particular people came to be the way they are. As Berk writes, "biographic study is a disciplined way of interpreting a person's thought and action in the light of his or her past" (p. 94).

The study of personal history, whether biographical or

autobiographical, is an empirical study of concrete, experiential events. Berk refers to the daily logs kept by his student participants. Pinar (1981), in his autobiography, and Grumet (1978), in her work with clinical instructors, use detailed, personal remembrances. This biographical detail is used to create an informative, reflective explanation of an individual's actions. Grumet, in work with students, asks them to transform their educational experience into a text to allow themselves to distance themselves from the experience. Once the text is created, it is subjected to various forms of analysis. Through the autobiographical method, says Grumet, the author of the piece is shown "the way in which he has construed his experience and reveals the ways in which curriculum has invaded his own perceptual lens." (Grumet, undated, p.19). Pinar in using his own autobiographical musings to rethink his notions of himself as a curriculist, and Darroch in her work on autobiography, do something similar. Berk, similarly, evaluates the quality of a particular student's experience in terms of its educability for that student.

The experiential records that pass as "fact" in biography and autobiography are, by virtue of the emphasis on personal meaning, broader than the usual definition of schooling suggests. Whatever is of importance to the individual and may be shown to be connected to the event in question, is appropriate biographical data. Berk distinguishes between education and schooling to argue that the concern of biography is education and not merely schooling. Whatever may be shown to be educative, whether it occurs in school or not and whether it is private, social or academically formal is relevant. As Berk writes, "education is something that happens in the lives of individuals; that is where we must turn to

find it" (p. 90). Thus, the biographer and the autobiographer alike are unable, in principle, to define in advance of inquiry what will and what will not be credited as telling in the biography. It is the developing biographic explanation that determines relevance and not theoretical or practical constraints on inquiry defined at the outset.

The historical record of biographical events does not constitute the telling of a biography. Historical facts need to be selected and woven together to create a plot, the telling of which Berk calls a "biographic narrative" (1980, p. 89). Using terms borrowed from historical narrative (White, 1981), the mere listing of historical events might be said to constitute the "annals" of a biography. The weaving together of a story line, however connected, without the development of a plot complete with its explanatory conclusion, would be at best a biographic "chronicle". But biography, if we are to follow Berk's lead, is more than the creation of annals and of chronicles. It is the telling of a story with a point such that we may be able to say that we understand how it is that a person did or became such at a certain point in life. The chronicle, say, of one's sports career does not constitute a biographic narrative until that chronicle is interwoven with a building sense of thesis to account, for example, for how that person as a father introduces his child to sports.

The construction of biographical plot from the welter of possibilities is an act of reconstruction. In autobiography one reinterprets an historical record to make meaning of the present. A biographer does the same. Darroch puts the matter this way: "the knowledge of interpretive inquiry is a work to produce meaning and not a process of recognition"

(Darroch, 1982, p. 17). In this, biography is, as Darroch and Silvers argue, an interpretive rather than a positive human study. Grumet writes, "Most important, however, is the point that the text is not taken as a sign of what is or was. The very act of interpretation suggests that the text points to the future as it reveals what the text has concealed or forgotten and begins to bring these submerged intimations to expression." (Grumet, undated, p.18).

There is, as Berk insists, a notion of cause at work in this interpretive construction of biographic plot. But the sense of cause is not the positivistic one of showing the circumstances in which A leads to B or to a possible set of B primes but, instead, to situations of which one may say that the plot offers a plausible account. There are many possible, plausible biographic plots in each of our lives and in the lives of the teachers and students we study. This shift in the sense of cause is seen in psychotherapy in Schafer's (1981) work on interpretive psychoanalysis. He shifts psychotherapeutic thinking from specific causal incidents as the explanation of psychiatric disorders to the rendering of increasingly meaningful biographic narrations. The positivistic psychoanalyst searches for the root cause or causes while the interpretive psychoanalyst searches for and offers multiple constructions of stories and plots within a person's life. Likewise, educational biographers offer constructions of the latter kind.

Narrative inquiry, as we have outlined it, shares these characteristics with biography. Narrative is concerned with specific, concrete events in a person's life and is concerned to give an account of a

person. Furthermore, through the construction of personal philosophies, images and narrative unities, narrative method offers an interpretive reconstruction of parts of a person's life. It is a study which is historical, personal, factual, causal in an interpretive sense, and designed to reveal what is meaningful in a person's history for purposes of understanding classroom actions.

Differences: But these similarities do not make narrative method into biography. There are important differences, some of which we enumerate below. By way of transition to differences in principle between what we call narrative method and biography we shall document some of the differences among our five sets of biographers.

Using White's (1981) distinction between annals, chronicles and narratives, the work of both Pinar and Grumet, when expressed in written autobiography, tends to take on the character of a chronicle. In Pinar's autobiography, chronology is important and the sense of plot is not strong. Likewise, in Grumet's supervision study, plot is deemphasized. Her article is a kind of biographical kaleidoscope with a variety of telling points made about the autobiographical method; the students and their learnings; their teacher, Grumet; and the supervision process. Grumet in her work with undergraduate students in which she asks for tellings of three different experiences, does ask the students to "compare the patterns of action that may be common to all three narratives, noting thematic correspondences or contradictions."(Grumet, undated, p.18). Grumet sees "the stringing together of the three distinct narratives" as "loosening our immersion in any one of them" and as permitting us "to carry

the momentum of our movement between them, beyond them." (Grumet, undated, p.18). This version of biography is not, as we understand it, narrative in the sense that White would have it in history, nor as Berk would have it in narrative biography.

Pinar and Grumet both draw attention to two key intellectual lines of development in their work, psychoanalysis and existentialism. The psychoanalytic leads them to adopt what Pinar refers to as "free-associative" methods of recall. It may be imagined that the existential thread leads to the focus on chronicle as opposed to narrative.

The study of narrative exhibits a sense of unity in a person's history not seen in the biographical or autobiographical work studied. By "unity" we do not imply the mere "happy" unfolding of memory in a person's life. On the contrary, narratives both of novels and of biographies, including autobiographies, are narratives involving the confrontation of events or circumstances which refuse to cohere with the personal knowledge derived by the person in question from past events or circumstances. There are, then, conflicts and tensions which punctuate and colour the rest of one's life. Individual lives, thus, embody continuities of conflict.

One of the most noticeable differences between the psychoanalytic chronicle style biography defined by Pinar and Grumet and biography as defined by Berk and Butt is in the emphasis on reconceptualism. Pinar lays claim to this term arguing that autobiography results in one's seeing oneself in different ways thereby creating a new consciousness. Possibly more by association than by constructed argument, autobiography,

accordingly, has tended to become identified with the political arguments of critical theorists. See, for example, the classification of reconceptualists in Giroux, Penna and Pinar (1981). Pinar, of course, argues for the political consequences of this formulation of autobiography. In this link with ideology and political reform, autobiography departs from biography as pursued by Berk and Butt and, of course, from narrative, at least as pursued in our own work.

But the principle upon which this departure is based, namely, that of the reconstruction of experience in the creation of plot, is common among the above writers on biography. Similarly, in narrative the formation of images and the creation of personal philosophies are particular reconstructions of experience. Thus, while Berk argues that the justification for biography and education depends upon its ability to reveal meaning in educational experience, it is also the case that this new meaning, because it constitutes an altered way of viewing events, leads to new insights and to new ways of doing things; in effect, to reconceptualism. This point applies to the study of narrative where we have argued that the reconstructions that occur in the act of research lead to changes in practice. That is, research itself is an act of school reform quite apart from any possible uses of the products of research (Connelly and Clandinin, 1985).

Still another point of departure of narrative from biography is seen in Berk's reliance on Dewey's theory of inquiry and Berk's subsequent notion that educational biography must focus on problematic situations. In outlining the method he notes the following steps: selection of an episode

to be explained, the search for evidence of a turning point in the episode, the search for evidence of the problematic character of the episode and, finally, evidence of consequences of the solution. There is, therefore, a sense that it is the big events and not the ongoing business of education that is the stuff of biography. This sense also emerges from Pinar and Grumet's autobiographical work where transitions in one's life tend to be under study. Narrative, however, is concerned with the everyday business of schooling whether tense and problematic or routine and cyclic. Indeed, we find that terms such as "image", "metaphor", "ritual", "cycle", "habit" and "rhythm" are often more telling of how students and teachers know their classroom than are terms associated with the tensions of problem-solving and confrontation. These terms, of course, have their place. But whereas biography and autobiography are designed to be useful in accounting for such problematic events, narrative is primarily concerned with the mundane; with the day by day ongoing activities of schooling, parts of which might be seen as problematic.

With the exception of Darroch and Silvers' notion of autobiography, both autobiography and biography as presented embody a separation of researcher and participant in inquiry. The autobiographer reports to himself with, perhaps, prods and suggestions by the researcher and the biographer elicits a record which may be constructed through interview or by the participant in the absence of the researcher. In narrative, however, researcher and participant enter into a collaborative relationship of classroom work. The significance of this is that qualitatively different kinds of knowledge claims result: claims which are tacit, (Polanyi, 1958) moral and emotional (Clandinin, 1985a, 1985b). Such

knowledge is neither subjective as it might become in autobiography nor objective as it might become in biography. By "personal knowlege" Polanyi means that there is a resolution of the objective and subjective within a person's knowledge. "The act of knowing includes an appraisal; and this personal coefficient, which shapes all factual knowledge, bridges in so doing the disjunction between subjectivity and objectivity" (Polanyi, 1958, p. 17). It is precisely personal knowledge so understood for which the study of narrative is useful.

The emphasis on personal knowledge of classrooms highlights one of the principal differences between narrative and biography. The primary focus in autobiography and biography, as evident in the above work, is on method. For both cases, the purpose of the method is to reveal something about individual persons. In both cases, these proximate ends are set in terms of long-term ends, social reconstruction and evaluation of educational experience respectively. But the burden of the writing is with method. Little attention is given either to the proximate or to the long-term ends except, of course, to name them but the working out of these substantive matters using particular people's autobiographies and biographies is mostly missing.

In contrast, the emphasis in narrative, as least as defined in the study of personal practical knowledge, is on how people know classrooms. Method is subsidiary. Indeed, to briefly enter the biographical spirit, we note that almost all of our earlier writing and work was directly on the topic of personal practical knowledge with the derivation of terms such as image, rhythm and ritual. Only recently have we become self-conscious

about the methods used. Even narrative unity began as a substantive term. It is a term, borrowed from MacIntyre's notion of narrative unity, which names the continuities and unities which we see at work in individual's classroom actions. Only now are we beginning to imagine narrative as methodological. It remains for us primarily a substantive term.

There are two points of significance in this observation. First, because narrative is concerned with classroom understanding, most of our fieldnote and interview data are devoted to ongoing classroom records and reflection on them. Only a small proportion of these records are given over to the noting of biographical underpinnings. Admittedly, the biographical material is of no less significance for this. It is crucial to the creation of narrative unities to account for classroom practice. But the biographical material is not collected with biographical ends in mind. It is collected as explanatory material, recovered as various narrative unities are traced. In this, biographical material is used as it is in Schaffer's psychotherapy, not for the sake of constructing a biography, but for the sake of telling a client's story with new meaning. The second point of significance is that the study of narrative as defined by us is epistemological. Our interest is in knowledge and knowing; interests which are captured in the term "personal practical knowledge".1.

Possibilities For The Study of Teaching

Notwithstanding these various differences it is possible, of course, that when this account is complete, some will still wish to call narrative inquiry as we use it "biography". Indeed, it is biographical to the extent

shown. But it is also "reflection-in-action" as defined by Schon. In the end, it is neither. Just as we have argued that, while there is a close family relationship between narrative and Schon's reflection-in-action (Clandinin and Connelly, 1985), the two lines of work are different in principle, so too in this paper we have argued with respect to biography and narrative. Indeed, to point the way, Schon's work would never be mistaken for work in biography; likewise the biographer's work would never be mistaken for Schon's work on the study of practitioner thinking. Yet, narrative inquiry as described bears strong resemblances, in it parts, to each.

Accordingly, reflection-in-action, biographic, and narrative studies of teaching, while exhibiting some common features, differ significantly in data collection, knowledge claims and purposes. Data collection in narrative method is on classroom action over extended periods of time. Biography and autobiography tend to focus on recollections of past action, something which is of second order importance in narrative method. Reflection-in-action focusses entirely on present events with little emphasis on events extended over long periods of time and no emphasis on personal history.

The knowledge claims of both narrative and biography tend to take the form of a story: a structured plot with beginning, middle and end. But whereas the plot in biography is primarily an historical rendering of a person, in narrative the focus is on the ways in which classroom actions are meaningful to a teacher. Reflection-in-action, because of its data collection methodologies, has no sense of story or plot. Its knowledge

claims have to do with the way in which actions are performed in classrooms and the resultant concepts which account for those actions.

Ultimately, the most important differences between narrative and biography for the study of teaching have to do with the research purposes to which each may be put. The methods of biography and autobiography, as presented above, are used primarily for personal reflection. While narrative has this quality because of its collaborative methodology, its ultimate purpose is to develop an understanding of the teaching process more generally and to develop a language of classrooms tied to the emotional, moral and aesthetic character of classroom life. Reflection-in-action, while aiming at general terminology, does so in a depersonalized way. Whereas the claims of biography and narrative are personal in character, those of reflection-in-action are cognitive.

Reflection-in-action, biography and narrative each contribute something special to our understanding of classrooms. We have made the case for narrative inquiry by sorting out its methods and purposes from those of biography because we believe it has something special to offer; something that might easily be overlooked in inquiry because of its use of, and similarity to, biography. Narrative method offers a way to understand teaching and learning in classrooms as a temporal process reflecting the biographic histories of its participants.

Note

1. The term "personal practical knowledge" (Connelly and Diennes, 1982; Clandinin, 1983) marks the boundaries of our inquiry into teaching. The term "knowledge" points to our underlying epistemological interest and associates us with those interested in problems of knowledge and knowing in the curriculum. The term "practical" qualifies this epistemological interest by aligning us with writers such as Schon whose interest is in the epistemology of practical thinking. The term "personal" qualifies our interest in the epistemology of practice by pointing to our interest in how specific individuals know their classroom situation. Accordingly, the term "personal practical knowledge" defines our interest in understanding teaching acts in terms of personalized concrete accounts of people knowing.

This unique ground for the study of teaching is not to be understood as lacking general theoretical interest. On the contrary, our interest is to reimagine the epistemology of teaching and, thereby, to offer an alternative way of viewing classrooms.

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